



[Comments \(0\)](#) | [Recommend \(0\)](#) [Email](#) | [Print](#) | [Reprint or License](#) | [Share](#)

Alabama scores with golf trail

World-class courses, beautiful settings and affordable fees draw more and more players.

By Steve Mills
Chicago Tribune

Posted: Saturday, Feb. 28, 2009

PRATTVILLE, Ala. The view from the first tee of The Judge, one of three courses at the Capitol Hill stop on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, is breathtaking: Spanish moss hanging from the tall oaks on the left, the Alabama River on the right, all of it about 200 feet below.

Between the expanse of river and the stand of trees is a fairway silvered with the early morning dew, the kind of tableau that has drawn an ever-expanding group of friends to this part of the country for the last five or six years. We golf and, in what for some of us is culinary research, eat barbecue. By the end of the day, after at least 36 holes of golf and, in the patois of the barbecue joints we frequent, three meats, we usually are exhausted. It is a great feeling.

During the last 15 years, Alabama has become an increasingly popular destination for golf, its combination of world-class courses and affordable greens fees at the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail's 11 sites drawing savvy golfers from across the country.

The trail and its individual courses routinely place near the top in golf magazine rankings and not only for affordability, though it is always near the top in that category. The Grand National resort in Opelika and Capitol Hill, here in Prattville, ranked at the top of Golf World magazine's 2009 readers' choice awards.

With good reason. The courses are beautiful and challenging at any level, a difficult combination of tough terrain, sand traps and water hazards that are a good but fun test for serious players and recreational golfers alike. The on-site Marriotts I have stayed at are well-appointed and comfortable; the Renaissance hotels I've seen are fancier.



Golfers tackle one of the Grand National courses in Opelika. It's among the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail's 11 sites in Alabama. CHUCK BERMAN – MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE PHOTO

MORE INFORMATION
[Alabama in the fore-front](#)

If you died today,
what would happen to your family's future?

Protect them today with
life insurance.

CLICK HERE
FOR A FREE QUOTE!

10-Yr Level Term	age	male
Life Insurance	35	\$ 15.75
\$500,000 Policy	40	\$ 20.56
(monthly premiums)	45	\$ 31.06
	50	\$ 45.08

EVENTS

DINING

MOVIES

Joan Baez
Monday, Mar. 2, 7:30PM
[Blumenthal Performing Arts Center](#)

Riverdance
Tuesday, Mar. 3, 7:30PM
[Ovens Auditorium](#)

[More Events](#) [More Venues](#)

RECENT BLOGS

WE CAN RELATE

[What's wrong with these roses?](#)

WE CAN RELATE

[A reason to celebrate tonight](#)

WE CAN RELATE

Clubhouses at each course, while similarly designed, offer good snacks and meals – mostly the basics, although the breakfast sandwiches make for a good start to any round of golf. The pro shops stock an ample selection of logo clothing and a relatively small selection of equipment.

But it is what you get for your money that draws most golf fanatics to the RTJ trail.

“You can go to some places and spend an outrageous amount of money,” said Mike Pillen, who works at a sporting-goods store in Kewanee, Ill. “But here you have great golf for a reasonable amount of money.”

Pillen, 47, was at Capitol Hill the same weekend as my group. He later told me that this was his second trip to Alabama for golf. This time out, he and two friends made a local motel their base camp and played for five days, leaving early in the morning to drive to different stops across the state. When Pillen and his friends were finished, they had played 153 holes of great golf.

Over the years, I have been to seven of the trail's 11 stops, and I have yet to be disappointed. My favorite location: Grand National in Opelika, with its two courses, the Lake and Links, though the two courses at The Shoals in Muscle Shoals, in the northwest corner of the state, are a close second.

Because there are 11 locations, you can choose how far you drive. This time, from the Birmingham airport, we headed to Opelika, about 2 1/2 hours southeast.

We stay two nights at each resort; it is nice to settle in rather than drive every night. So after Opelika, we headed here to Prattville, staying at what was a nearly identical Marriott.

Famed course designer

Of course, the trail offers more than just affordable golf. There are the afternoons when, just as you are teeing off, a blue heron lifts off from the water, or you spot an eagle flying above the piney woods. Yes, you could argue that the golf interrupts such a tranquil scene. But if you are there for golf, it accentuates it.

That was part of the plan when David Bronner conceived of the golf trail. The head of the Retirement Systems of Alabama, Bronner during the late 1980s and early 1990s was frustrated. True, the system was well-funded, his chief responsibility. Nonetheless, he felt as if he had not accomplished all he wanted.

At the same time, Alabama was experiencing a crisis of sorts, when controversy erupted over the site of the 1990 PGA Golf Championship – the Shoal Creek Golf and Country Club, near Birmingham, which had not admitted any African-American members.

“What Alabama didn't understand was that it wasn't a sports-page story,” Bronner said in an interview. “It was a front-page story. So what I wanted was to change Alabama.”

Bronner lured famed course designer Robert Trent Jones to Alabama to design the trail. Now, golfers come to Alabama for a terrain of mountain, rivers and the Gulf of Mexico, a landscape that Bronner calls “especially blessed.”

The result: Since the first trail stops opened in the early 1990s, tourism has seen healthy increases, rising by about 4million visitors from 2000 to 2007 alone, topping out at 22.4million. It helps, Bronner said, that many of the locations have other attractions.

The trail also has attracted professional golfers with various events from the LPGA Tour, the Champions Tour and the Nationwide Tour. Mostly, though, the trail hopes to attract golfers looking for a fun and affordable trip, one that gets them more golf than they get elsewhere.

Prime time to go? That's March, April and October, said Bronner, when it is warm in Alabama. Last late October, we enjoyed days that began chilly – we even had a rare frost

A reader asks: What happened to casual dating?

IF THE SHOE FITS

Tough, chic nail polish

WE CAN RELATE

What you can buy at a 'slumber' party

MOST VIEWED

Snow knocks out power, closes roads

I-85 shut; motorists stuck overnight

Map | How much snow did you get?

Mom drives through storm to face the military


'Work from home' say police

Child falls two floors in Discovery Place

delay one morning – and gradually warmed until the afternoon temperature was in the 70s.

 [Subscribe to The Charlotte Observer & Earn Miles.](#)

POWERED BY  Pluck

 You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Comments:  0 Showing: Newest first

More comments on this story:

 [Disclaimer](#)

[Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail](#)
The official site of Auburn-Opelika, Alabama. Home of Auburn University and world-class golf
[www.aotourism.com](#)

[Golfing Partner](#)
Fitness Singles is a growing online dating community for sports and fitness enthusiasts.
[www.fitness-singles.com](#)

[Birmingham Criminal Lawyer 888-655-4740](#)
Charged with a serious crime, DUI or other offense
You need help.
[www.wareslaw.com](#)

Ads by Yahoo!

Contact Us » Corrections Letters to the Editor Report a broken link Staff Listing	Submit Content Upload your pictures Upload your videos News tips	Advertise With Us » Classified Ads Retail Ads National Ads Magazine Ads Online Ads Direct Marketing	Online Extras RSS Feeds Mobile version Maps & Directions Yellow Pages Charlotte's got a lot	Observer Network ThatsRacin.com MomsCharlotte.com twitter/theobserver
---	---	---	--	--